

**Testimony Provided by
Safe Shores – The D.C. Children’s Advocacy Center
Before the U.S. House of Representatives
Committee on Government Reform
Hearing on “Protecting Our Most Vulnerable Residents: A
Review of Reform Efforts at the District of Columbia Child
and Family Services Agency”
Friday, May 16, 2003 at 10:00 am
Rayburn House Office Building, Room 2154**

Good morning Chairman Davis, Congresswoman Norton, and members of the House Committee on Government Reform. My name is Jennifer Massengale and I am the Acting Executive Director of Safe Shores – The D.C. Children's Advocacy (CAC). It is an honor to be invited to testify before you today.

The CAC is a non-profit, public-private partnership created in response to a Mayoral Executive Order issued on January 10, 1994. The CAC, working in tandem with an interagency multidisciplinary team (MDT) of local and federal agencies, was established to provide a coordinated and child-friendly approach to the investigation and prosecution of civil and criminal child abuse cases in the District of Columbia. Our Center, its programs and the protocols we follow were developed based on the National Children’s Alliance (NCA) model. The agencies that comprise our MDT include the Metropolitan Police Department, the Office of the Corporation Counsel, the United States Attorney’s Office, the Child and Family Services Agency, and Children’s National Medical Center.

The CAC provides direct services to child victims and also serves in a coordinating role for our MDT agencies. As a coordinating agency, the CAC's staff facilitates cooperation among the MDT by providing statistical case tracking, bi-weekly team case reviews to coordinate the civil and criminal investigations, joint forensic interviews, trauma assessments, therapy, and pre-trial support for alleged child victims. We also seek to improve the investigative and prosecutorial processes by encouraging accountability, providing training and consultation, and advocating for child victims.

As a direct service provider, the CAC facility is designed to provide a warm and welcoming place where child and adolescent victims of abuse can feel safe and supported while waiting for forensic interviews, therapy, and court appearances. The staff also ensures that children receive supervision, meals, clean clothes, crisis intervention and other emergency victim services during the investigative process.

All of the cases that come to the CAC are referred by one of MDT agencies—usually by MPD, but sometimes by Child and Family Services Agency (CFSA). At this point, approximately 75% of our case load involves child victims of sexual abuse, and the remaining 25% involves child victims of physical abuse and child witnesses. The majority of our cases have CFSA involvement.

In general, over the past few years, the CAC has seen significant improvement in the way this city's child welfare system approaches child abuse cases. Three of the most important changes—all of which the CAC advocated for in previous testimony before this Committee—were the

restructuring of MPD so that ***all*** child abuse cases are investigated by the Youth Division; the end of the bifurcation of social services between Court Social Services and CFSA; and the termination of the receivership of CFSA. The result has been a much smoother and more coordinated response by the entire system. We have also seen improvement specific to CFSA and I would like briefly to highlight some of the progress we have seen.

- **More experienced social workers in the Intake Unit** – Given its role, the CAC works primarily and extensively with social workers from the Intake Unit of CFSA, particularly the Special Abuse Unit. The Intake Unit is responsible for receiving initial reports of abuse and investigating the report. CFSA’s emphasis on assigning seasoned and specialized social workers to this unit has made a clear difference in the way in which investigations are being conducted. One specific example of how investigations have improved is that multiple allegation cases are now assigned to the same social worker if appropriate. As a result, the investigator is able to establish rapport with the family and is able to make more informed decisions based on knowledge about the family history and dynamics.

- **Improved Joint Investigations with MPD** – CFSA and MPD have made two significant strides in ensuring a coordinated and timely joint investigation of reports of sexual and physical abuse. First, five intake social workers have been co-located at MPD’s Youth and Preventative Services Division (YD) to facilitate these investigations. Best practice models demonstrate that physical co-location of the agencies charged with investigating and prosecuting child abuse significantly improves outcomes in these cases due to increased communication and interaction. Second, MPD

and CFSA have developed a detailed Memorandum of Understanding on Child Maltreatment and Joint Investigations. This document provides detailed and specific information on MPD's and CFSA's roles in investigating abuse allegations – both jointly and individually – and supplements the Memorandum of Understanding on Child Sexual Abuse Investigation, Prosecution, and Prevention under which our MDT agencies operate. This level of detail and specificity can only ensure improved responses and greater accountability.

- **Development of an Institutional Investigations Unit within the Intake Unit** – CFSA has created a unit within the Intake Unit specifically tasked with conducting investigations of abuse that occurs in an out-of-home placement. In the past year, we have seen several cases where this Unit addressed incidents of abuse that occurred in an out-of-home placement in a timely and appropriate manner. In addition, this Unit was able to facilitate constructive changes in CFSA's placement of children through internal policy decisions to suspend placing children in those facilities and also brought these cases to the attention of the official monitoring agency charged with handling re-licensing matters.

These areas of improvement are noteworthy. More importantly, this progress clearly demonstrates a commitment by CFSA and the city to improve services to abused children through the implementation of best practices coupled with the regular evaluation and improvement of existing services.

While there have been tremendous gains, the system as a whole has not yet reached the level of excellence for which it clearly strives. CFSA does

not operate in a vacuum. Given the tremendous overlap in the responsibilities and missions of individual agencies in the child welfare field, the entire system needs to continue to work together to increase outreach and services, refine policies, and improve implementation and procedures. In an effort to assist with this on-going evaluation and improvement process within the larger child welfare system, the CAC has several recommendations for areas of continued progress:

- **Increase the Availability of Therapeutic Services for Victims**
– Child victims who do not receive adequate therapeutic services are at a greatly increased risk for a myriad of problems including re-victimization, long-term psychological disturbances, significant delays in cognitive and emotional development, suicidality, and sexual reactivity. Yet, there is a severe lack of qualified and affordable community-based clinicians in the D.C. area who are willing and able to treat child abuse victims—particularly child sex abuse victims—and their families.

- **Increase the Availability of Services for Young Perpetrators** –
The CAC has observed an increase in cases involving younger and younger perpetrators, particularly in the 7-9 year old age range. Practice and research indicate that children this young who are perpetrating on other children were most likely victimized themselves. To adequately address the perpetration issues, these sexually reactive children need to have their victimization issues addressed as well. However, because of their status as perpetrators, they are not eligible for victim services, and access to organizations or agencies in the D.C. area specifically trained to address this population is morbidly lacking. Nor, given their age, is it generally appropriate to seek services through

delinquency proceedings as our juvenile justice system is not equipped to deal with such young children. Failure to adequately address this underserved population will continue to undermine the child welfare system's ultimate goal of preventing abuse.

- **More Extensive Coverage by Intake Unit** – While the Intake Unit of CFSA functions on a 24 hours, 7 days a week schedule, the majority of the staff works during the daytime. In order to ensure optimal functioning, more Intake workers need to be available during the evening, midnight, and weekend shifts to conduct joint investigations with MPD.

- **Designation of Similar Funding for Other Involved Agencies**
– In order to fulfill the mandates established by the consent order that released CFSA from receivership, the city has increased funding for CFSA, as well as for the Abuse and Neglect Section of the Office of the Corporation Counsel. This deserved and needed funding has been critical in enabling these agencies to hire adequate staff to handle the influx of cases. Before the increased funding, the Abuse and Neglect section had only sixteen attorneys covering up to 1,500 court hearings per month. However, as the city has experienced budget problems, other agencies and departments involved in child welfare issues have suffered cutbacks and/or staffing freezes. MPD's Youth Division, which has striven for the past five years to build a team of highly trained child abuse investigators, has positions which remain unfilled following the transfers of detectives to other units. The Office of the Corporation Counsel's Juvenile Section has only ten attorneys to handle approximately 3000 new cases per year, compared to forty-two attorneys in the Abuse and Neglect Section for 1100 new cases per year. Each of these

agencies plays a critical role individually, and as part of the larger system, in ensuring better outcomes for child victims of abuse. Further progress by the system as a whole, and CFSA in particular, will be hampered if additional resources are not designated to these agencies as well.

- **Dual roles of the Abuse and Neglect Section** – The Abuse and Neglect Section of the Office of the Corporation Counsel is charged with representing D.C. in civil matters related to child abuse and neglect. As part of the consent order, in the past year, the entire Abuse and Neglect Section was co-located at CFSA. The purpose of the move was to promote increased communication, a very positive step. However, in addition to the physical move, the Abuse and Neglect Section was given the additional responsibility of representing CFSA. This dual representation is a conflict of interest and presents serious ethical issues for the Assistant Corporation Counsels (ACC). ACCs are now required to take input from social workers on which cases to paper, and social workers are required to clear all reports through ACCs prior to submitting them to the Court. There are clearly instances where an ACC cannot zealously represent both D.C. and CFSA, for example a case where an order to show cause has been issued against CFSA for information needed for the city to adequately prosecute a case. This type of structure prevents independent judgment, accountability, and advocacy by either agency and is not in the best interest of child victims.

- **Development of City-wide Child Assessment Center** – As I previously mentioned, in prior testimony before this Committee in May of 2000, the CAC made four recommendations to improve the city's response to child victims of abuse. Three of those four recommendations have been

enacted, and the result has been improvement in the systems response. However, the fourth and one of the most important recommendations has not yet come to fruition after nearly three years: the development of a city-wide Child Assessment Center that will enable co-location of the MDT agencies under one roof and increase the availability of services to child victims.

Since 2000, the CAC and the MDT, in conjunction with the National Children's Alliance (the CAC's umbrella organization), have been working with representatives from Mayor's office to build a state-of-the art city-wide Child Assessment Center that will allow co-location of the MDT agencies. The city identified the Gales School site as the appropriate location to house the new Center given its proximity to courts and the team agencies, and the need for a stand-alone structure that will enable different entrances and egresses and circulation patterns to ensure that victims and perpetrators never cross paths.

When finished, the new Center will house the entire Youth Division of MPD, the Intake Unit of CFSA, prosecutors and child advocates from the Office of the Corporation Counsel and the U.S. Attorneys Office, and a medical examination suite for Children's National Medical Center. As has been demonstrated on a smaller scale at the CAC's current Center and with the recent co-location of six Intake social workers at YD, having agencies housed together promotes optimum collaboration between the agencies and increases the quality of services.

On one of its seven floors, the Center will also house the National Children's Alliance (NCA), which will make the Center unique in providing a collaboration not just between public and private agencies, but between

local and national as well. In addition, the Center will have two fully staffed playroom areas, an expansive therapy suite for child victims, seven sets of forensic interviewing rooms, and a model training area for local and national child abuse professionals. The result of this new Center is that the CAC and the MDT will be able to better serve more child victims in a manner deserving of our Nation's Capital.

There has been crucial progress on this project over the past eighteen months. In February 2002, the city—through a letter from Deputy Mayors Graham and Kellems to Councilmembers Allen and Patterson—officially pledged \$7.3 million in capital dollars to assist in the renovation costs of the Gales School, and that funding was included in the budget. Additional funding needed for construction, as well as for decorating and furnishing the building, will be raised jointly by the CAC and the NCA. City funding is appropriate because the Gales School will remain a D.C. owned building that will house D.C. agencies and will serve D.C. residents. In addition, over the past five years alone, the CAC has provided critical services worth in excess of two million dollars to D.C. residents and D.C. agencies *at no cost to the District*. This amount does not reflect the higher fair market value it would have cost the city to provide the same services directly, nor does it include the significant donation of in-kind services by the CAC.

Many major cities already have child assessment centers that function in the way the Gales School site will function once completed—look at Chicago, Houston, Brooklyn, Huntsville, Dallas, Memphis, Phoenix, Miami, and Plano. Yet, in the Nation's Capital, children have historically been at the bottom of the priority level in terms of city finances and resources. That has

started to change due to agency restructuring, a redirection of the city's priorities, and an increase in resources. The pledge of the Gales School site and the renovation money is a major step in the right direction by the city.

However, three years later, roadblocks continue to emerge greatly delaying the project—a project for which time is of the essence. In July of 2002, City Council passed legislation amending the Prevention of Child Abuse and Neglect Act of 1997. This legislation mandates a MDT approach in all child sexual abuse cases, requires the extension of the MDT approach to more physical abuse cases, and specifically requests the CAC's participation in the MDT. The expansion of the MDT's role in physical abuse cases will directly and positively influence CFSA's provision of services to this population.

We currently serve approximately 1000 children through our Center each year, and as a result of this legislation, we anticipate an immediate 20% increase in the number of cases seen through the CAC and the MDT. This number is only a small segment of the children needing services in this city. Yet, at this point, space and infrastructure limitations are impeding progress. The CAC only has room to co-locate two detectives and one social worker at the Center because we are doubled and tripled up in all of our office space. In order to meet the need for a greater availability of therapeutic services, the CAC is in the process of hiring a second Therapist, but first needs to do construction in order to turn closets into additional office space. Building this new Center is an imperative step in enabling the CAC, the MDT, and our city to move the next step of service provision—particularly to the point of prevention of abuse.

We encourage this Committee to support the CAC, the Mayor, our MDT agencies, and the NCA in our continued progress on the development of this Center and to assist us in facilitating a ground-breaking within the calendar year.

In conclusion, I want to thank the Committee once again for inviting our testimony. The CAC strongly supports our MDT agencies, particularly CFSA, in their goal of providing the highest quality of service delivery to child victims of abuse in D.C. The city's child welfare system has made significant progress, and we are confident that with adequate support and resources throughout the system, this goal will be achieved.

Thank you.